Rage-baiting and Anger-clicking: The Dissent Factory of Online Media

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Abstract

This article examines the emergence of ‘rage bait’ and ‘anger clicking’ as defining mechanisms of the contemporary attention economy and argues that online media have evolved into a dissent factory based on the monetisation of anger. Taking Oxford University Press’s selection of ‘rage bait’ as its 2025 Word of the Year as a cultural indicator, the article traces how emotionally provocative content has become structurally embedded in digital platforms designed to maximise engagement. It connects micro-level phenomena such as ‘anger clicks’ in user experience analytics with macro-level theories of Propaganda 2.0, contrasting Christian Fuchs’s Marxist approach, Tobias Rose-Stockwell’s analysis of the outrage machine and Peter Ayolov’s model of the ‘manufacture of dissent’. The documentary film The Social Dilemma is used to illustrate how insiders from Big Tech describe engagement-based business models that optimise for outrage and polarisation. The article concludes that what used to be described as ‘war as a racket’ now extends to a permanent ‘cold war online’ in which symbolic conflict, outrage and dissent are systematically converted into economic value, creating a new ‘economy of words’ that benefits platforms while corroding democratic communication.

Keywords:

rage bait; anger clicks; monetisation of anger; manufacture of dissent; propaganda model; attention economy; digital capitalism; Social Dilemma; Christian Fuchs; Tobias Rose-Stockwell; Peter Ayolov.

Introduction: Rage Bait as Cultural Symptom

In 2025 Oxford University Press chose "rage bait" as its Word of the Year, defining it as online content deliberately designed to provoke anger, discord and polarisation in order to drive engagement. Usage of the term has tripled over the past year, signalling growing awareness that outrage has become a central tactic in digital communication, not a marginal pathology. Rage bait is closely related to clickbait, but with a narrower emotional focus: where clickbait trades on curiosity and surprise, rage bait works by eliciting negative affect that keeps users talking, sharing and fighting. This choice of word reflects a deeper structural reality often

summed up by the axiom "angry people click more". In contemporary online media, anger functions as both a psychological trigger and an economic resource. The more a piece of content can enrage people, the more attention, data and advertising revenue it tends to generate. This article explores how rage-baiting and anger clicking have become core mechanisms in what may be called the dissent factory of online media, in which platforms and publishers profit not from consensus but from managed conflict.

From Anger Clicks to Affective Business Models

At the micro level, "anger clicks" are a technical term in product analytics. They refer to fast, repeated clicks or taps on the same element when the interface does not respond as expected, typically three or more clicks within a short interval. This behaviour reveals user frustration with slow-loading pages, broken buttons or misleading design that appears interactive but is not. Such anger clicks are used by product teams to identify friction points, as they correlate with lower conversion and higher abandonment rates in tasks like checkout or sign-up. However, the same logic that treats anger clicks as a usability problem at the level of individual interfaces becomes inverted when viewed from the perspective of platform-wide business models. At scale, frustration, outrage and conflict are not merely costs to be minimised; they are signals that content is emotionally engaging, and therefore likely to keep users on the platform for longer. High-arousal emotions, especially anger, predict higher rates of sharing and commenting than neutral content. This empirical regularity underpins the economic rationale for an affective attention economy: anger is a reliable driver of engagement, and engagement is the main currency sold to advertisers. In this sense, the metaphor "angry people click more" names a structural principle: anger is both measured and manufactured because it increases the value of the audience commodity.

Rage Bait and the Transformation of the Propaganda Model

Herman and Chomsky’s original propaganda model conceptualised mass media as a system that "manufactures consent" through five filters: ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak and a dominant ideology (such as anti-communism). These filters collectively select, frame and limit news in ways that support elite interests, producing a relatively uniform mainstream narrative. Peter Ayolov’s Propaganda 2.0 model, by contrast, argues that the digital media environment has shifted from manufacturing consent to the systematic "manufacture of dissent". In a fragmented, platform-dominated ecosystem, a single stable consensus is neither feasible nor profitable. Instead, online media and social networks profit by producing and amplifying ideological conflict. The old filters are

reconfigured rather than abolished. Ownership still matters, but in the form of global platforms such as Google and Meta that control algorithmic visibility. Advertising remains central but moves to programmatic, data-driven targeting that rewards content able to hold attention. Sourcing includes official institutions but is now dominated by user-generated content, influencers and alternative outlets whose visibility depends less on editorial hierarchy than on algorithmic ranking. Flak takes the form of coordinated harassment, mass reporting and bot-driven campaigns that punish dissenting voices. The ideological filter becomes a flexible "anti–X'' logic—anti-migrant, anti-gender ideology, anti-globalist—where the key is not a single unifying enemy but an endless rotation of polarising targets. Rage-baiting fits this transformed model perfectly. It is a content strategy that exploits and intensifies each filter: platform owners profit from heightened engagement; advertisers reach highly activated audiences; unverified and polarised sources gain disproportionate reach; flak is mobilised through outrage storms; and shifting ''enemies'' are used to keep conflicts alive. Under these conditions, propaganda no longer aims at a unified worldview, but at a constantly renewed state of antagonism that is economically productive.

Fuchs, Rose-Stockwell and Ayolov: Three Perspectives on the Outrage Machine

Christian Fuchs offers a Marxist extension of the propaganda model into the age of Big Data and social media. He conceptualises users as digital labour whose activity and data constitute an ‘audience commodity’ exploited by platform capital. Propaganda 2.0, in this sense, is not only about messages but about infrastructure: platform ownership, data extraction and algorithmic control reproduce class power under the guise of participatory communication. Tobias Rose-Stockwell’s Outrage Machine approaches the same system from a more psychological and design-oriented angle. He shows how social media platforms were built around engagement metrics and A/B testing that steadily favoured emotionally charged content. Interfaces that highlight notifications, trending topics and confrontation create an environment where outrage is not an accident but the expected by-product of optimisation for attention. Ayolov, in The Economic Policy of Online Media: Manufacture of Dissent, synthesises these insights into a more explicitly political-economic model focused on anger. He argues that the principle ''angry people click more'' has become the unwritten economic policy of online media. The deliberate distortion of facts and the centring of ideological and racial topics operate as divide-and-rule strategies within a ''civil cold war online''. Whereas Herman and Chomsky described how dissent was filtered out to stabilise consensus, Ayolov contends that dissent itself is now produced and managed as a profitable asset. Together, these three perspectives reveal that rage-baiting is not a stylistic excess but a

structural function at the intersection of capitalist ownership, algorithmic design and affective exploitation.

The Social Dilemma: Inside Testimony from the Dissent Factory

The documentary The Social Dilemma offers an insider narrative of how major platforms came to be organised around engagement, retention and behavioural prediction. Former designers and executives from companies such as Facebook, Google and Twitter describe a business model in which every design decision is tested against its capacity to increase time-on-site and interaction. Algorithms are trained to maximise ''meaningful social interactions'', but in practice this often means surfacing content that evokes strong emotions, including outrage and moral indignation. Interviewees describe how notifications, personalised feeds and recommendation systems were refined through continuous experimentation to discover which combinations of images, headlines and topics keep users returning. The film illustrates, through dramatised sequences, how a teenager’s social media feed becomes more extreme as the underlying systems learn that certain kinds of provocative content elicit more reactions. While The Social Dilemma has been criticised for simplifications, its central claim aligns with both academic work and platform leaks: engagement-based optimisation naturally drifts towards divisive and inflammatory content because such content produces measurable signals of interest. In this perspective, rage bait is simply the content category that best matches the optimisation function, and anger clicking is the behavioural trace that confirms success.

Cold War Online and the Economy of Words

The phrase ''war is a racket'', originally associated with critiques of the military–industrial complex, captures a logic that now extends into the symbolic domain. The industrialisation of outrage has created a kind of permanent ''cold war online'' in which words, images and symbols function as weapons in ongoing conflicts between identity groups, parties and ideological factions. Unlike traditional war, which depends on state budgets and physical destruction, this symbolic cold war is directly integrated into everyday communication. Each skirmish—each viral controversy, boycott call or culture-war hashtag—generates a flurry of clicks, shares and comments that feed the commercial machinery of platforms and publishers. In this sense, propaganda and cold war online are good for the "economy of words'' and "monetization of emotions". They increase the volume and velocity of communicative acts, making language itself a high-frequency trading asset in the attention markets. The more polarised and affectively loaded the discourse, the greater the value extracted from every interaction. Advertising impressions, subscription drives, donations to partisan outlets and data profiling all benefit from environments saturated with rage bait. The costs are social rather than economic: erosion of trust, fragmentation of publics and the

substitution of performative dissent for effective political action. From the standpoint of capital, however, the dissent factory is efficient. It turns moral outrage into surplus value without needing to resolve the conflicts that produce it.

Conclusion: Anger as Central Category of Propaganda 2.0

The rise of rage-baiting and anger clicking signals a qualitative shift in the functioning of propaganda under digital capitalism. What began as a model of manufacturing consent has evolved into a system that manufactures dissent, not as a failure of control but as a profitable business strategy. Platforms, guided by engagement-based algorithms, discover that anger is a superior input for attention and data extraction; publishers and influencers adapt by producing content that reliably provokes it; users become both the targets and the unpaid workers of this dissent factory. Christian Fuchs's emphasis on digital labour, Tobias Rose-Stockwell's analysis of outrage-centric design and Peter Ayolov's theory of the manufacture of dissent converge on a simple but profound insight: anger is no longer just a political emotion but an economic category. Any contemporary propaganda theory that omits the monetisation of anger risks describing a media system that no longer exists. The permanent cold war online, fuelled by rage bait, delivers economic benefits by keeping communication in a state of managed crisis, where each new controversy resets the attention cycle without challenging underlying power structures. If there is an answer to this dilemma, it will not come from appeals to individual self-control alone, as important as media literacy and personal restraint may be. It requires structural interventions: alternative, public service–oriented infrastructures; regulatory limits on engagement-maximising designs; transparency about algorithmic criteria; and normative frameworks that treat affective manipulation as a central concern of media policy. Until such measures are seriously pursued, the dissent factory will continue to thrive, turning every new word of the year, every outrage cycle and every anger click into one more data point in the profitable economy of words.

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